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THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE OF THE TRINITY

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A pragmatic view may, in this practical age, be taken for granted. Already in sermons and lectures we have had ethical treatments and ethical descriptions of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Yet most, even of those who have thus treated this central Christian dogma, have gone no farther. One of two attitudes has usually been assumed: either the dogma with its incomprehensible terms has been accepted and allegorized, or it has been explained away. Neither is the attitude proper to the science of theology. Starting with the "ethical," that is, the practical side of the doctrine, from an analysis of this a theory must be built up which either supports or undermines the Christian dogma. Lest it seem that the outcome is prejudged, it may be remarked that what the church has held, in some sense, from the very beginning, cannot be fundamentally untrue to its own experience. Men cannot be mistaken for two thousand years as to the central element of their religious experience. We must expect, therefore, to find ourselves in virtual agreement with the Christian dogma. Yet we may enter the inquiry with our eyes open, and not attempt to steer our course by a philosophy that for us does not exist.

Starting from the Christian religious experience, one thing forces itself on men's attention today; the Christian experience is not totally different from that of other religions. A little study of the history of religions shows this. No sharp line can be drawn between the experience of Christians and the religious phenomena of pre-Christian times and of non-Christian lands. Christian mysticism cannot be sundered by a gulf from the mysticism of India, nor the Christian zeal for monotheism from the Mohammedan's devotion to the one God, nor the ethical bearing of Christianity from the Confucian emphasis on morals. Hence it should be expected that the grounds for a doctrine of the Trinity may be traced, though less clearly, in other religions than Christianity. This has two results: (1) the final

theory will have relation with the general theory of religion and hence of the world; (2) as a result of this last, the idea of the Trinity takes its place as necessary to the idea of God even for metaphysics. This last point is important as showing the general attitude. If the theory which is reached from a logical analysis of religious experience is connected with experience in general, then metaphysics, the science of abstract experience, must take account of the analysis of this particular experience. The connection is even closer, since the special experience is in this case the deepest experience of reality. God is the power behind all existence, as even Spencer argues; relation to God, therefore, is the deepest experience of reality, hence the best subject of metaphysical study. The attempt to construct a theory of the Christian experience of God is therefore a study in metaphysics, and must be conducted as metaphysics. A metaphysical inquiry has two main requirements. It must first start from an analysis of experience, and, secondly, it must draw out the implications of this analysis. In this case the experience which is the object of study has two forms: it is first the Christian experience in general, and, secondly, the Christian relation to Christ. We have to analyze the relation which Christians find themselves to be in toward God through their worship, through prayer, through the conviction of sin and of redemption, and the immediate relation which may be called mysticism. Of course in this paper no details of treatment can be given. Besides this there is the relation to the historic founder of Christianity. The primary experience is at bottom the same as in the first case—the verification or denial of this is the primary problem. Is the relation to Christ a relation to God or not? The answer to this is the answer to the problem of the Trinity.

The second mark of a metaphysical inquiry is the dialectic which takes such an analysis and forms from it a theory. It is necessary to insist on this because today dialectic in Christian theology is supposed to have ceased with the scholastics. It is not necessary to rehabilitate the schoolmen, for the dialectic since Kant is different from theirs, yet the spirit is the same. The result which will be reached through modern dialectic is not far different in spirit from the feeling of the Middle Ages. It cannot be too strongly asserted that it is not the doctrine of the Trinity which is a mystery, but the

Trinity itself. The Christian dogma is no mystery. It is the expression in the terms of a past dialectic of the Christian experience. That experience, no more than any deep experience, can be made completely intelligible. But the statement of what analysis we can make should and must be intelligible and logical, the direct outcome of the analysis. If such a method is followed, Christian theology need not fear a "scientific" philosophy, for it will go deeper into reality than any natural science. The opponents of the application of metaphysics to theology do not see that the result of such an application will be that metaphysics must take account of theology. To follow such a method means to found theology again on sure foundations, and not leave the central Christian dogma in the realm of fancy or of art. Christian doctrine must be shown to be the necessary logical expression and outcome of Christian experience.

In analyzing the religious experience in general, one element is almost always clearly present. The savage, whatever else be his motive, performs religious ceremonies because he believes that the god can bring good or ill on him. If he did not believe this, there would be no religion. A god who could neither harm nor benefit his worshiper, would soon cease to be worshiped. The religion of fear is not alone in this. The god of rain as well as the god of storm is worshiped. These acts of worship, then, spring from a belief in the power of the god to help or harm. Such a belief cannot be explained as chance or as deception. It is based on some human experience. What the experience is in the case of the savage we can only infer, but that there is some experience which forces the human being to pay attention to powers beyond himself is plain. Nature and ancestor worship show two forms of this feeling of dependence. Man feels that nature and his ancestors have some power over him. What we find in low forms of religion comes to light also in the higher. Confucianism is a higher form of ancestor worship (taking it as a religion, and as it now is), hence dependence on powers larger than the individual is central in the Chinese religious experience. Buddhism, as we find it today, makes use of a power deeper than the individual will. It clearly teaches the uselessness of individual endeavor. All creation, gods and men, acclaim the power of the Buddha. The Buddha, though proclaiming himself to be only the teacher of

the way, becomes in the eyes of his followers a power to which heaven and earth bow. With the monotheistic religions, what was an inference becomes the central truth. The Mohammedan assertion of the oneness of God is an assertion of the limitless power of God. God is the cause of all. Fatalism is but the extreme expression of this belief in God's power. The experience which led Mohammed to the insistence on this was the consciousness of the presence in his life of but one creative power. Against the Christian Trinity he can only appeal to this experience. Can God have a son? He cannot conceive of another sharing the creative power. His experience of God is that of the all-powerful. As in Mohammedanism, so in Christianity. The center of the Christian experience is of God as the powerful, helping father. The Christian experience, as all religion, involves prayer to God and experience of His power to answer it. Too many have borne witness to the power that comes from prayer to God for any to doubt. Central in the Christian experience is the certainty of relation to a creative power, a power which is above the forces of nature, since it can make their violence powerless to hurt the spirit and will of man. Man knows God as a source of power over nature which has its source outside humanity.

Peculiar to the Christian religion is the relation to Christ. That relation in Buddhism is contrary to the teachings of Buddha, who says that no man can help another, while the essence of Christianity is that men are saved through the man Christ Jesus. As this is peculiar to Christianity, the traces in other religions are too dim to be of use. The description must come from Christianity itself. For this reason, since the experience is not universal, it must be more carefully described. The relation of the Christian to Christ is first that of follower to a leader. Christ started a certain movement, in which all Christians are members. The nature of this movement, whether to convert the world to certain moral truths, or to love God, or to something else, is not important here. Christ is the head of an organization which is to carry out his work of teaching, if you will, or of something more. The essence of such a relation is the feeling of dependence. In acknowledging Christ as leader, the Christian accepts Christ's direction as to certain acts. He promises to obey. In the Christian experience we find more, however, than this. In

the second place, Christ is the redeemer, the savior. The Christian experiences through his relation to Christ a change of relation to sin. Through Christ the Christian becomes able to resist sin. This is fundamentally different from the relation to Christ as leader. In the relation as follower, the Christian yields himself to a power outside him; in the relation to the redeemer, he is in relation to a power within him. As a third relation there exists the consciousness of union with Christ. Not only is he known as leader, and as a power against sin, but, more intimately than this, the Christian is joined to Christ. This we may take to be the principle content of the phrase, "members of Christ." To describe it more explicitly would be impossible, but this at least is clear, Christ is known in the Christian experience, not as an intruding force, but, when the consciousness of union is present, as the deeper power of the man himself. It is this consciousness that has always prevented the final triumph of an objective expression of redemption.

This is the experience, and we have answered our question in its first form. This relation to Christ is not different, when analyzed, from the relation to God which is fundamental to all religion. God is experienced as the source of power. The fundamental Christian experience is that Christ also is a source of power. With whatever right the savage worships nature, the Chinese their ancestors, the Buddhists Buddha, or the Mohammedans Allah, the same rights have the Christians to worship Christ. Not only is Christ a source of power; for the Christian he is as great a source as, or greater than, the god of nature. The analysis has shown the Christian experience to be at least dual. What it knows of the God of nature as power, it knows also of Christ.

There is yet a third element in the Christian experience. The phenomena of conscience cannot be reduced to either of the elements we have considered. Conscience is not the consciousness of a power outside of us—it is most certainly within. Nor is there any consciousness of relation to Christ. As far as we can tell, the moral experience of Socrates was that of a Christian in this respect. His "demon" is the Christian conscience. Hence there is no necessary relation to Christ. In cases where it is said conscience acts, a power within man either prevents or tends to prevent some act. It is an arbitrary

distinction which does not also include the impetus to action. A sense of duty would seem to be as clear when a right act is performed as when an evil act is not done. Similarly, it is arbitrary and illogical to call an impulse to right, God, and the impulse against evil, conscience, and divide the two. The experience here to be analyzed is then the experience of some power within man, neither the Creator nor Christ, acting in favor of righteousness. The best description in objective terms of this is that certain acts, whether by inheritance or training, or both, have come under the ban of the better nature of man. This phrase, "the better nature of man," is not begging the question, for by it is meant simply those instincts and tendencies in man which make him a better member of human society. This "better," or social nature acts in favor of those activities which benefit society, and against those which harm it. Here there is again a power. Here again the power is larger than the individual, though not exterior to him. It is larger because it is a racial, and not an individual, tendency. The things which are right and the things which are wrong have been wrought out by the race. The individual inherits, or is trained in, the racial standards. As a member of the race he shares the power to distinguish between those acts which do, and those acts which do not, conform to the racial standard. This power, if it was acquired at all, was acquired by the race, certainly not by the individual alone. Hence it is correct to say that this power is supra-individual. Better than "conscience," if it were not too cumbrous, might be the term, "the power of humanity." In the power revealed in the phenomena of conscience we have the experience by man of a power in himself. The source of power which he worships need no longer be sought only outside; man finds God in himself. No distinction can be made on this empirical basis which can destroy the results of this analysis. The power in the human race is as worthy of worship, and is as true an experience, as the consciousness of relation to God the Creator, or to Christ. The Christian experience is threefold. It contains a relation to the creative power outside of man, to the creative power in the man Christ Jesus, to the spirit of man itself.

The three elements in the Christian experience which have been described do not stand apart. The power which Christ exerts is not

apart from the creative power of nature. There are many ways in which the connection between the two may be shown, but only one can here be followed out, and even this must be suggested rather than fully developed. The power of Christ is mainly evident as the power against sin. Whatever definition of sin may be proposed, it must include the idea of sin being necessarily opposed to the will of God. That which is a power against sin would be a power for God. Before this identification can be finally made, however, the nature of the Creator as revealed in the religious experience must be more carefully analyzed than has yet been done. The creative power, known to the savage as the power of nature, to the Chinese as the influence of heredity and parental training, is known to the Christian as the power of love. In speaking of the Creator, the idea must not be limited to the Creator of the physical, non-human world. The same power, in the current cosmologies, created man as created the rocks; man is a part of nature, not apart from it. This is the meaning of the religious statement that God created man as well as the beasts or the solid earth. So in the Christian experience the two are connected. As in biology, so for the Christian, no uncrossable gap is known between the God of the storm and the earthquake, and the God known within man. Suppose an earthquake has destroyed the houses of a group of men. They pray to the power of nature, and renewed energy is given them to rebuild their homes. For them the force of the earthquake is broken. If man has power over inanimate nature, if he uses winds and electricity and fire as he wills, certainly the power in man which gives him strength and energy to overcome nature is itself greater than nature. This means that the true creative power is in man in such a case, rather than in nature outside of man. This small attempt to point out that the God of nature is known also as the God of man, may be left for a moment as it is. In considering the third element in the Christian experience we shall return to it. Christ is known as a power opposed to sin. Those things are sinful, by the definition of sin, which are opposed to the will of God. Sin, in man, is the tendency to oppose God. Christ is, then, a power to aid God. God, in relation to humanity, is the power of nature, the forces of the universe taken as a whole. What the Christian or any worshiper regards as God's will comprises those things which the

forces of the universe demand. For the human race these forces are the forces of the social life and its advance. Man is by nature a social being. The God of nature and his demands are the force of the social life and its demands. These demands Christ helps to be obeyed. The Christian knows Christ as one who brings him into harmony with the ethical requirements of man's life. The conflict with the "world" may seem to contradict this, but this conflict is not the deepest word of the Christian experience. That word is "peace" (John 20:19). Christ is then one with the demands and forces which create man. It must be remembered in saying this, that these natural forces include the innate tendency of man to struggle and progress. The Christian knows Christ as coworker with the deepest tendencies and forces in man's own nature and so as coworker with the Creator, the God of nature. If Christ, a power exterior to man, is thus connected with the Creator, certainly the power of humanity itself, which is the third element in the Christian experience, is also connected. Evolutionary ethics has proved that conscience is part of the moral structure of man, evolved as his physical nature is evolved. The power in the human race is certainly, unless we put a gulf between man and the lower creation, at one with the creative power in nature generally. Basing this simply on experience, the Christian feels that what nature demands, Christ helps to perform; to that the spirit of man guides.

The three elements in this experience are connected, but it would be speaking too hastily to say that they are identical, or even the same power coming through different channels. That they are not identical in their immediate source is evident. One is perceived as a power outside of humanity, the second as the power of a man, the third as a power in man. The further question is whether they may not be traced back to a common source. The alternative to this is that they exist in conjunction, but have no one origin. The evolutionary description of man, which has been more or less assumed, may seem to be incompatible with this latter alternative. The genius of man has the same source as the power in animals or plants, and all these sprang from the inorganic forces. There are two answers to this, both of which have some truth in them; first, it is by no means certain that anything was added to the inorganic forces to produce the

organic. If that is the case, the organic were really present in the inorganic. That the two are today different forces, no one can deny. It is impossible to reduce our pure experience of organic nature, with will and purpose, to the inorganic. Hence, if this hypothesis is true, the organic was really present in the beginning with the inorganic. The alternative to this is that the organic was developed out of what was in no way organic. Now, however, organic forces do exist, and that from which they were developed, which is by hypothesis entirely non-organic, also exists. Hence we have two distinct powers.

In this whole consideration reference is made to our pure experience, not to the reduction to a third something of both organic and inorganic. Whatever that third thing may be supposed to be, it is not experienced by us. From experience there are known two distinct powers, and evolution does not concern this fact. In the special experience before us, as far as experience goes, certainly the power of nature outside man, and the power of Christ are distinct. They are so distinct that the problem of Christianity has been to connect the two, hence the trinitarian controversy. The essence of the distinction is found in the fact that the power of nature in general does not to any great extent work against sin. The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. Disregard of natural law may bring disaster, but the power that can guard against this is man's intelligence, not the physical force. Whatever attempts may be made to interpret natural calamities, earthquakes or storms, no sure connection can be made with the moral idea of God. So true is this that it has led some to say that the God of nature is not the God of Christians. Connected with this, and a further illustration of the same thing, is the deeper consciousness of sin which the Christian has. The savage has no such deep conviction of sin as the Christian. This supports the view that an essential difference between the power of nature and the power of Christ is the relation to sin. This distinction forces the conclusion that the creative power of nature is not known to man as primarily ethical. Man's relation to nature is that of a person subject to arbitrary powers. The idea of the righteousness of God, that is, that God is moral, is a later development in the history of religion, and is fully expressed only in Christianity, where the relation is not to the creative power alone, but to a distinctive moral power. Where the

former alone is present, as in Mohammedanism, God may love or pity, but he does not judge right or wrong. He blesses whom he will, not necessarily the good. So it is a fundamental and unshakable distinction that the God of nature is not, and Christ is, concerned with sin. This would also distinguish the third element, the spirit in man, from the first, power in nature. There is another distinction that separates the power of Christ and this spirit. The influence of Christ is the influence of a historic person. It is a power introduced into history, and comes to the Christian from without, through the Bible or the Church. The spirit of man is within, and comes from within. However much the Christian may feel himself to be in union with Christ, Christ is always other than himself. Man is at the most only one member of Christ. With the spirit known in conscience, however, man identifies himself. The "no" of conscience springs from the depths of a man's own nature. The power of Christ is essentially the teacher of the brotherhood of man. The relation to Christ is a relation to the Christian social consciousness, while in conscience the source is in the individual. Thus neither of the three elements in the Christian experience can be resolved into either of the others.

Many of the terms which have been used in describing the Christian experience need now to be justified. So far, description alone was the main point; now it is necessary to draw out some of the results. On the basis of this experience, from the relation which the Christian holds to the powers of the universe, something may be concluded as to those powers themselves. The Christian's relation to the power in natural phenomena, it was said, was a relation to a power which could fortify against those phenomena. This is the relation of the worshiper, but primarily every man feels the powers of the storm and the wind and the earthquake without reference to his attitude toward them. Man is subject to the powers of nature. A storm at sea tosses a man as much as it does the rock ballast on the ship on which he sails. There is no question, however, that the effect on the man, if he has courage, is different from that on the rock. The storm, if it is not too violent, brings out the will of man to conquer it. So the ships for which the Mediterranean voyage was a great danger have given place, through man's courage in meeting danger, to the great steamships of

today. The joy of fighting and overcoming nature is as certain a fact as the joy of battle against human enemies. Perhaps the best illustration is that for many men mountains exist but to be climbed. That this advance of the power of man over nature has been due to religion cannot be denied. Unless the earliest sailors had had faith in the possibility of propitiating the gods of the sea and the storm, they would never have sailed. This relation is today often not recognized as religious, but it is due to the religious beliefs, hidden though they may be. Facts of this kind prove that to man the powers of the universe have been revealed as not entirely purposeless. Though the force which man can exert is certainly less than the total forces of the universe, through purpose and will and trust in himself, man can govern, to a certain extent, inanimate nature. The forces of the universe include the supreme power in man. The powers, therefore, that are at the basis of existence, give a place to the purposiveness of man. The connection between the power of the universe and the power of Christ against sin shows that the universal forces include the ethical. Because the Christian experiences the God of nature in connection with an ethical power, the God of nature takes on an ethical or moral character. The power against sin that Christ and the spirit of man exert is not something totally out of relation to the forces of nature. These forces, therefore, must be conceived, in their highest development, as purposive. The universe is experienced by the Christian as due to the personal power of will, or rather, as most fully expressed in conscious will. The experience that forces this conclusion on the Christian is mainly the influence of Christ. This influence, if it is to be given a place in the world, is primarily to be classed with the influence of man on man. From Christ himself no direct word reaches us. His followers' memory of him is all we have, and that comes to almost all through some teacher or through their parents. Hence the power of Christ comes to us only through men. It is therefore the influence of men. Yet it is certainly larger than the individual. It is a power which includes a great body of men in a common purpose. Each man who is "joined to Christ" is joined also to his fellow-Christians. The power of Christ is thus one of the great cohesive forces of humanity. This shows the relation it holds to universal forces. It is included in them. One of the great effective agents

in the world is this power of Christianity. It stands also, however, in a still closer relation to the primal forces. In the course of ages the powers of the universe have successively produced the earth, organic plant life, the animals, and finally man. How this has come about is not here of importance. But it is important to see that under any general terms which are used to denote all the forces of the universe, man, and the forces at work in man must be included. Hence the power of Christ must be explained as one of these forces, or as the product of these forces. It cannot, as has been shown, be reduced to any of the non-human forces, nor to the powers in physical nature. Hence, at the least, Christ, is a power as much as nature. He does not, however, stand apart from nature, but gives strength to obey her demands, the demands of the social life of man. Hence the power in man that Christ is, is fundamentally in union with the forces at the basis of all existence. For one statement there is, however, no foundation. To say that Christ and physical nature are both the expressions of a single power is an unwarranted extension of human knowledge. What is known is, that they are distinct, though connected. Whatever may be the thing common to both which connects them, it is neither of the two. Physical nature and Christ stand equal. Materialism and subjective idealism are both at variance with Christian experience if they assert that either is the basis of the other. It must also be repeated here, that priority in time is no proof that Christ was produced by the purely physical forces. Christ is therefore to be regarded as the power in man which works toward the success of the forces which underlie all experience. The third element in the Christian experience brings the first two into close connection. This third element was described as the power larger than the individual lodged in the individual. As the natural forces have or acquire a certain line of action in rocks, as plants follow out the innate tendency of their species, so man tends to follow the forces which most deeply and really express his nature. Each individual has individual traits, but below all these are the racial and inherited tendencies. Of these conscience and the natural impulse to good are the expression. In man the forces of nature, the forces which produce him, become the force of the race and its power. This power is expressed in and affects the wills of men. It is experienced as power

acting on human will yet greater than it. It might be said that this power is acquired, not natural to the race. This objection is unscientific. Any power that is acquired must have had some source, and must, if it is not natural to the human race, have existed somewhere else. Either it is the natural expression of the race itself, or, given to the race by an outside source, it arose or was natural to something else in the universe. Natural to something it must have been, for science allows no chance in the world. It is this power, or rather this power in the wills of men that connects Christ and the Creator. This spirit of man is natural and is allied to the spirit of nature; Christ appeals to this spirit of man, and aids it against evil; therefore Christ is a power connected with the spirit of nature. Thus the Christian experience is consistent. Since it is the third element that connects the two first, the third element must, although the others cannot be reduced to it, yet reveal something of their nature. This third element is in itself a purposive power, that is, a power directed toward an end of which man becomes conscious. Often, by itself, this power does not prevail over the will in man to sin, but when, through the influence of Christ, it does so prevail, the end and tendency of this force of man comes to consciousness. In the Christian experience the universe is known to have one goal. The powers of physical nature to the non-Christian seem often to war against the tendency of the human race, but for the Christian, the power of nature, brought to consciousness in Christ and in his followers, is seen and known as the real expression of man, of nature itself. Thus the Christian experience is essentially monotheistic. The powers of the universe are seen to have one goal and that goal is ethical.

So far the Christian experience in its usual form has been followed. This form is, however, very probably partly molded on the form of doctrinal expression. Yet the underlying experience has been made clear. It is now possible, therefore, to state the conclusion reached in terms of the experience itself, and, if it employs philosophical terms, using those of the present day. Taking the results of the analysis the conclusion reached is that Christ is a power to bring to man's consciousness and will the demands which the spirit of man, as embodying for the man the spirit of nature, is making on him. Turning this around the spirit of the universe finds its expression in

a man, and in that expression becomes a conscious will. How this spirit of the universe finds its expression in man has been discussed. The last two phrases must be made more plain, however. First, what follows from the fact that Christ is a power against sin, is that a power against sin is expressed in him. The tendency of man to follow the spirit of man in its demands for the betterment of the social life comes to full consciousness and expression in Christ. Such is the Christian experience. Secondly, this expression is not the same as the expression of thought in words. With Christ what was before a somewhat hidden tendency comes to full light, and becomes, for Christians, a conscious will in them. It is not merely known to them, but it is a purpose that, in them, is conscious of itself. So the analysis of the Christian experience supports the statement, which may be taken to represent the scientific and metaphysical account of the doctrine of the Trinity: the will of the universe reaches its expression in man, and in him becomes a conscious will. In this form the Christian dogma is justified.